

**‘We’re not a team, Mum - we’re opponents!’: Negotiating
Adolescence Bilingually**

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Abstract

With notable exceptions (such as the work of Li Wei, 1994, and Zentella, 1997), the majority of work on interaction within bilingual families has concentrated on the early years of language acquisition, with studies of later childhood and adolescence focussing mainly on school and peer group contexts. The present study addresses this gap by studying family interaction with children in late childhood/ adolescence, arguably a critical period in terms of the negotiation of linguistic identities. It draws on video recorded data from a longitudinal case study of a Spanish-English bilingual family, resident predominantly in Mexico, comprising Mexican-born mother, British-born father and twin boys. The data on which this presentation is based includes detailed analysis of naturalistic interaction at the point when the twins are aged 14, plus retrospective commentaries by the participants. It also draws on data from the limited number of comparable studies available.

A key finding to emerge from the research has been the significance of gender in both the changing language preferences and the conversational code-switching strategies practised by the adolescents in the home context. Rather than attributing these solely to factors beyond the home, such as a generational shift in social networks or the status of particular linguistic codes in the surrounding community, there is evidence here for interpreting them additionally in terms of the performance of gender identities and the negotiation of power relations within the family. In the case study family, where each language has been predominantly associated with one parent, sibling rivalry for parental favour has frequently entailed displaying a strategic alignment with the maternal or paternal language, in order to ensure the most favourable outcome from an interaction. Additionally, at this stage in their lives, it is important for the boys to define themselves as distinct from their parents, and in particular their mother. The symbolic meaning attached to each language in this specific context may not extend to other contexts beyond the family.

Code switching in the ‘nuyorican’ community has been described by Zentella (1997, p.113) as ‘a conversational activity via which speakers negotiate meaning with each other, like salsa dancers responding smoothly

to each other's intricate steps and turns'. In the present study, by contrast, the family interaction more closely resembles the intricate moves of a fencing match, in which maternal and paternal linguistic codes are selectively deployed by the adolescents to attack and parry (or occasionally offer submission to) what are perceived as the maternal and paternal values.

Key words:

Adolescence- code-switching families gender pragmatics

Introduction

The research I report on here is part of a longitudinal case study of a Spanish-English bilingual family, resident predominantly in Mexico, comprising Mexican-born mother, British-born father and twin boys. It builds on established bodies of work on bilingual families and communities (for example, Li Wei, 1994; Zentella, 1997), on interactional aspects of code-switching (for example, Milroy and Muysken, 1995; Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai, 2001) and on gender and language use (for example, Graddol and Swann, 1989; Pavlenko et al, 2001), as well as a smaller and more specialised body of work on the language use of older children, especially family mealtime talk (for example, Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2002; Hoyle and Adger, 1998). Family life is traditionally a difficult arena to gain access to because of privacy issues and in the literature mealtimes predominate! The data that I report on here derive from recordings made when the twin boys were aged 14. My main focus has on the strategic use of language choice in the achievement of pragmatic goals and in the performance of gender identity.

Competing or complementary accounts of code-switching?

I take it as axiomatic that bilingual code-switching is a particularly salient case of the general phenomenon of code choice within an individual's linguistic repertoire. As Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai neatly put it, 'Choosing one's words is... purposive behaviour' (2001, p. 2). The similarity with the choices made by so-called monolinguals in relation to a repertoire of language varieties are evident. Auer goes even further in arguing that 'code-alternation ... is but one of an array of devices such as intonation, rhythm, gesture or posture which are used in the situated production and interpretation of language. [This] explains why the functions of this cue are often taken over by prosodic or gestural cues in monolingual conversation' (2001, p.123).

The defining feature of a sociolinguistic approach to code-switching has been that language behaviour varies systematically and, in particular, that

language use is indexical of the social roles and networks of interaction within particular linguistic communities. Few, if any, working in a sociolinguistic tradition today would assert that language behaviour is pre-determined by social group affiliation. As Le Page and Tabouret-Keller first pointed out in 'Acts of Identity', concepts such as 'a language' and 'a group or community' only come into being through 'the acts of identity which people make within themselves and with each other' (1985, p. 2). Reified identities (us/them; his/her) have now largely been replaced by the notion of negotiated selves.

However, many key figures working in the field hold to a 'mixed' model where both group membership and individual agency play complementary roles. According to this model, community networks may function as 'frames within which language choice takes place' (Milroy and Li Wei, 1995, p.153), speakers are seen as 'rational social actors ... within a normative framework' (Li Wei, undated, p. 16) and 'norms and social meanings ... are a backdrop for interpreting the [linguistic] choices of others' (Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai, 2001, p.12). According to Myers-Scotton's model, some linguistic choices will be signalled as normal or 'unmarked' for the context, whilst others will be signalled as deliberately deviant and therefore 'marked'. The paradox is that, although individual agency is recognised, in the absence of a shared sense of the normative linguistic behaviour of social groups, speakers will have no fixed reference points, and hearers will not be in a position to recognise choices as marked or unmarked. Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai argue that 'Speakers are rational in the sense that their choices depend largely on assessments of possible options in terms of a cost-benefit analysis that takes account of their own subjective motivations and their objective opportunities' - the motivations being driven by their understanding of the 'rights and obligations' that obtain in the situation and the 'opportunity set' being their linguistic repertoire (Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai, p.4-5).

A more pragmatically oriented Conversation Analytic approach takes as its starting point that code-switching is interactionally motivated and sequentially significant, especially in the context of adjacency pairs within speech acts such as request-response or apology-acceptance. According to this model, the speaker's motivation for choosing one language in preference to another is driven not so much by the symbolic meaning of the code per se as by an understanding of the interactional norms of the situation and their own pragmatic goals. Auer asserts that 'the correlation between language and activity is not strong enough to make code-alternation predictable, but the direction of switching is nevertheless important for

reconstructing its conversational meaning' (Auer, 1995, p.132). Milroy and Li Wei, on the other hand, argue that 'the contrast is more socially meaningful than the actual choice of language. Switches marking dispreferred responses can be in either direction' (Milroy and Li Wei, 1995, p. 149). The findings of this study provide evidence for both arguments.

Findings of the study

For some bilingual families, the concepts of 'speech community' or 'community network' have relatively little significance, since the family represents a linguistic island with its own patterns of behaviour, which do not derive from the immediate surrounding community. It follows that, in such cases, the conventions and symbolic meanings of linguistic behaviour - including who speaks what language to whom and about what - must be largely internal rather than external to the family. By way of example, the English language is generally assumed to be invested with particular social meanings as a product of its status as a 'powerful' language. However, there is no direct evidence of such global associations in the relationship of English to Spanish in the context of this study. The pattern of use of Spanish and English has fluctuated over the years, as the family has spent periods resident in the UK and the USA, as well as their home in Mexico, and the twins' educational experience has been predominantly bilingual. For most of their life, Spanish has been the preferred medium of interaction between the twins as a dyad and with most of their Mexican peer group.

On the other hand, in the context of their family interaction, English is very clearly identified as 'father's language'. Although there are occasions in the data where the father is overheard speaking Spanish with third parties, English is consistently the language of interaction between father and sons, and appears to be the language of any utterance intended to be overheard by him (in the role of 'ratified side participant'), even if it is not overtly addressed to him. It is in interactions with the mother therefore that most twin-initiated code switches occur. In common with Li Wei (1994), I have in my data examples of language switches between the boys and their mother which operate in opposite directions at different times, and where the functions and symbolic meanings of language choices seem to be specific to the micro-context. At the age of 14, however, many language choices seem to be heavily motivated by gender performance and/or by strategic alignment with the father. As the twins themselves conceded in interview, '*We always team up, the three of us. Against my Mum*'. (Twin A's contributions are italicised, whereas those of Twin B are plain bold.)

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Consistent with the findings of Al-Khatib (2003), my analysis of the twins' code-switching at age 14 implies that they 'strategically used their command of the two languages to signal new themes of defiance, challenging existing power-relations, destabilising prevailing interpersonal positions, and constructing new micro-situations' (p.420) and that 'they flout conversational etiquette...using linguistic means to change power relations and social roles' (p.417). If children are, in the words of Hatch (1978, p.384) 'co-operative conversationalists', then adolescents appear to be 'un-co-operative conversationalists'! However, note that many of the examples, here as elsewhere in the literature (see Appendices 1 and 2), are of mothers and sons, and yet this has not, to my knowledge, been remarked upon.

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APPENDIX A:

Selected examples from the twins case study

Bold type = Utterance in English (Twin B bold italic)

Underlined text = Utterance in Spanish. (Twin B *italic underlined*)

Italic type = non-verbal information

Spanish/English-speaking family resident in Mexico

Context: a game of Monopoly

Mother (*aside to Twin B*) (inaudible Spanish, *sotto voce*)

Twin B: *Yo no se [...] Con quien? Por ejemplo, banamos [...] no? (to father) [Dad], we don't have ball next week because it's project week. Hmm, yes it's you. (game resumes)*

Father: **She's got to give back the railroad.**

Twin A (boy aged 14): **Give it back.**

Mother: (*laughs*)

Twin B (boy aged 14) (*to mother*): **You don't get your money back for being stupid.**

Twin A: **Yeah, for being a cheat, no money back!** (pause) **Madison Gardens, do you buy it?**

Twin B: **She can't choose - it's you! She just rolled the dice. She's too late for it! 2, 3, 4, 5...**

Mother: **What?**

Twin B: **No, no, no, it's you! Okay, do you want to buy it?**

Father: **Yes.**

Twin A: **B has dough (?).** (*sniffs*) Meno... **buy it, I don't know...** (*inaudible Spanish?*) **No, vale. Si, si, compralo!** (*inaudible Spanish?*) **Eh?**

Mother: Porque no? Porque no?

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Twin A: (*wags finger*) **Too late!!**

Twin B: (*laughs and points at mother*)

Twin A: **No, B! No saying, no laughing, no nothing, B!!** (inaudible Spanish, *sotto voce*)

Mother: Porque? Porque?

Twin B: *Para que tu pierdas!*

Mother: (*throws dice in silence*)

Twin B: **Which one?** (*pointing at board*) **Are we doing here?**

Twin A: **Go ahead.**

Twin B: **Why do you say that?**

Twin A: **Because I want to. Have you got a problem?**

Mother: Ah, na, na... Este, no lo compres?

Twin A: (*defiantly*) **No!!**

Context: Telephone conversations

Twin B: (*Spanish to friend.*) **Okay, Mom, wait.**

Twin A: (Spanish to friend) Mama, voy a Coyoacan?

Context: interview

BM: I got the impression, when your Mum was speaking Spanish, you were saying 'No, don't!'

Twin B: **No, no./** Twin A: **No, no, we were telling her off for not being spontaneous!**

Mother: Yo hablo en espanol... (etc in Spanish)

Twin A: Pero no fue natural.

Mother: Eso es tu opinion. Eso es tu opinion.

APPENDIX B: Examples from the existing literature

Note that, for ease of comparison, transcription style has been standardised as follows to match Appendix A:

Bold type = Utterance in English

Underlined text = Utterance in the other language, as indicated.

Italic type = non-verbal information

Arabic/English-speaking family resident in UK

Son (aged 17): I am going out after I've finished studying for today.

Mother: What did you do?

Son: Ten pages as we agreed.

Mother: No, ten pages from each subject.

Son: **Na na I'm outta here.**

(Al-Hayat, 2003, p.418)

Hungarian/English-speaking family resident in USA

Mother: Would you like some salad, wouldn't you?

Son (aged 8 and a half): **I'll make my own salad.**

Mother: What?

Son: **I'll make my own salad.** They make it in such small plates at the restaurants. (making salad) I need some salad please.

Mother: I've given you all.

(Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai, 2001, p.7)

Son (aged 8 and a half): I'll make a lemonade.

Mother: I know that you want to have a drink. I'll get you one.

Son: Make a lemonade. I'm gonna get the ingredients. I know how much sugar I want in the lemonade.

(lifting bottle) **Oh my God. Let me just do it by myself.**

(spilling water) **Ah! Sorry, sorry! It was too heavy. I'm sorry.**

(Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai, 2001, p.15)

Japanese/English-speaking family resident in USA

Mother: Skewer the meat through this hole.

Older daughter (aged 16+): Meat. Well.

Younger daughter (aged 14): **I think they went diagonally when they pierced it.**

Older daughter: Really. (laughs)

(Rachicu, unpublished ms, p. 9)

Chinese/English-speaking families resident in UK

Mother: (in Chinese) Want some rice?

Daughter (aged 12): *(no response)*

Mother: Fried rice. Want or not?

Daughter: *(two second pause)* **I'll have some shrimps.**

Mother: What? Fried rice.

Daughter: OK.

(Li Wei, 1994, p.86)

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Mother: What do you want to eat?

Child (age and sex not given): *(one second pause)* **Just apples.**

Mother: Just apples? Why not have some yoghurt?

Child: *(two second pause)* **No yoghurt.**

(Li Wei, 1994, p.152-3)

Mother: **Who want some? Crispy a.**

Daughter (aged 9): **Yes.**

Mother: Want some?

Daughter: Yes.

Mother: **Want some, John?**

Son (aged 12): I don't want.

Mother: Don't want? Crispy la.

Son: *(shaking head)* mm

(Li Wei, 1994, p.164-5)

Son (aged 18): **Where's the keys?**

Mother: What? *(2.5 second pause)* It's raining.

Son: **I won't be long.**

Mother: **No.**

(Li Wei, 1994, p.170)

Mother: **Finished homework?**

Son (aged 12): *(playing on computer) (two second pause)*

Mother: Steven, want to review (your) lessons?

Son: *(1.5 second pause)* **I've finished.**

(Li Wei, 1994, p.163).

- the last three cases above illustrating that parental alignment with child's preferred language, English, may variously be interpreted as the expression of authority or of conciliation.